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ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 776THE NATION
26 June 1982

THE STORY TV COULDN'T TELL

The Vietnam Numbers Game

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One of the strangest press events in recent weeks was the appearance of a *TV Guide* cover story entitled "Anatomy of a Smear: How CBS Broke the Rules and 'Got' Gen. Westmoreland." The piece concerned a *CBS Reports* documentary aired in January called "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," an investigative report by producer George Crile and reporter Mike Wallace presenting evidence that Gen. William Westmoreland and others in the American military establishment had suppressed information about the size of the enemy forces during the crucial year before the 1968 Tet offensive. The program had an extremely small audience and stirred almost no controversy. Indeed, the only real reaction came from those directly concerned: Lt. Gen. Daniel Graham, head of military intelligence in Vietnam in 1967; Walt Rostow, President Johnson's national security adviser; George Carver, head of the Vietnam task force at the Central Intelligence Agency; and General Westmoreland himself.

So the *TV Guide* story is something of a mystery. *TV Guide* is not known for its investigative journalism, nor for its interest in four-month-old documentaries with poor ratings. The mystery is in no way solved by the content of the piece, for while *TV Guide*'s reporters criticize some of the procedures used by CBS, they profess agnosticism about the truth of the charges made against General Westmoreland. Thus by their own admission they fail to prove that the show was a "smear." (One of the reporters later told *The Washington Post* that he did not completely trust Westmoreland: "Some of the stuff he told us was factually wrong. Whether he was lying or just forgetful I don't know.")

One clue to the purpose of the *TV Guide* piece lies in its conclusion: that the network news divisions are not keeping their own houses in order and that "'safeguards' for fairness and accuracy need tightening, if not wholesale revision." Given the insubstantiality of the article (most of the criticisms are trivial and some contradictory), this conclusion is in the nature of a leap of faith. It is, however, the same conclusion drawn by the owner of *TV Guide*, Walter H. Annenberg, in an editorial he wrote in the magazine's May 15 issue. The difference between the two pieces is simply that while Annenberg's editorial was a defense of his good friend Ronald Reagan, the May 29 cover story was a defense of his good friend William Westmoreland.

The CBS documentary was in fact a major investigative effort and an important addition to the still-unwritten history of the Vietnam War. The subsequent attempts at rebuttal by Westmoreland, Rostow and Carver have, if anything, strengthened the story and added a few interesting details. Unfortunately, the broadcast contained its own leap of faith: the strong suggestion that Westmoreland kept secret facts from President Johnson as well as from Congress and the American public. This assertion is not documented and can be true only in the most limited way. To generalize such a charge is to put the evidence in the wrong context. Whatever the video generation may believe, television is not the best medium for certain kinds of history. For this reason, the story contained in the broadcast is worth examining here.

The first part concerns the estimates of guerrilla strength in 1967. In the spring of that year, the C.I.A. and the U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) were engaged in a dispute over the number of Viet Cong guerrillas that U.S. troops were facing in South Vietnam. The dispute was complicated because there were many categories of guerrillas—main force units, provincial units, administrative cadre, political cadre and so on—and because at the base were people who did not fit the usual military/civilian dichotomy. This was "people's war." The discrepancy between the C.I.A. and MACV figures was, however, extremely large, so large in fact that the two organizations seemed to be talking about different countries: the MACV figure was about 285,000, the C.I.A. figure some 200,000 more. The dispute should have been central to the debate over the war, but it was not, even when it became public knowledge in mid-1975. The reason for this was that the number of American troops sent to Vietnam depended not on estimates of enemy strength but on estimates of American public opinion.

In April 1967 Westmoreland was called back to Washington to help Johnson with his political battle to win over Congress, the press and the people. Westmoreland was not happy with the assignment but he performed it loyally, presenting a picture of steadfast optimism. In private, however, he told Johnson the war could go on for five years unless the Ho Chi Minh trail was cut, and to do that he needed up to 665,000 troops and permission to invade Laos, Cambodia and North Vietnam. (*The Pentagon Papers* reports this but the CBS broadcast did not. At the press conference after the broadcast, Westmoreland claimed to have told Johnson that the war could go on "indefinitely.")

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